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Selected News Release

Book Brings Drama to the Classroom

ORONO, Maine – Students generally like to role-play, but teachers are often hesitant to use drama in the classroom. Now a University of Maine professor has come up with a repertoire of techniques to enthusiastically engage students with text and guide teachers in directing the action.

In “Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension” (Scholastic 2002), Jeffrey Wilhelm draws on his research and classroom experience to enliven and enrich teaching and learning. Aimed at teachers of all subjects in grades 4-12, the book offers a bag of flexible enactments to motivate and help kids read better, and to connect classroom reading with their own experiences and interests.

“In drama, you don’t have meaning unless people work together and listen to each other,” says Wilhelm, associate professor of literacy at UMaine. “Drama makes reading very visual and requires thinking about what happens next.”

Organizing the strategies into “families” with many variations, Wilhelm describes a host of activities that ask students to represent the events and meaning of a text. Techniques range from role playing characters of various perspectives to mental modeling complex concepts such as electrical circuits. Enactments can motivate and involve all students, individually or as a group, Wilhelm points out.

Initially reluctant students can serve as recorders or take a more reserved role. But, he notes, it doesn’t take long for those students to see that everyone else is being active and undertaking interesting challenges, and they want to be involved, too.

“Enactment is the most powerful strategy I use in teaching,” says Wilhelm, whose research focuses on reading and writing skills at the middle school and high school levels. “It flexes intellect and can take students’ thinking and imagining to new heights.”

The step-by-step book represents groundbreaking work, according to Wilhelm as it is based on research around drama and reading and directed toward the often-ignored topic of adolescent reading. Much of the work was done in collaboration with teachers and students at Brewer High School (Maine), one of the UMaine College of Education and Human Development’s professional development partnership sites.

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